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Historical, Cultural and Intellectual Context

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INTRODUCTION

Victorians recognized how much their identities and cultural products were shaped by the determining 'environment' (Pater [1893] 1896: 6). Such self-consciousness made the social milieu a favourite theme of Victorian writers. The novelist William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–63), for example, conveyed his sense of the era through historical context: 'we of a certain age belong to the new time and the old one. We are of the time of chivalry . . . We are of the age of steam' (1863: 110). Like many of his contemporaries, Thackeray saw his culture as one in transition, embracing the modern scientific revolution yet reluctant to surrender the values of the past.

The fields that constitute the Victorian historical, cultural and intellectual context – the arts, philosophy and religion, politics and economics, science and technology – provide a framework for understanding Victorian literature. Issues and trends in these areas are reflected in literary themes, genres and styles. They also account for

attitudes about gender and sexuality, race and nation-
ality, class and social structure that Victorian writers and
readers often took for granted. For the modern scholar,
context clarifies the codes Victorians employed when trying
to interpret the social phenomena and developments of
their age.

Contextual understanding reveals the assumptions that
colour even the most 'factual' Victorian writing. Thomas
Babington Macaulay's (1800–59) influential *History of
England* (1849/1855), for example, is permeated by an un-
spoken view of progress that proclaims the triumph of the
Victorian nation: 'the history of our country during the last
hundred and sixty years is eminently the history of physical,
of moral, and of intellectual improvement' ([1849] 1906:
10). By establishing continuity between the nation's past and
its steady development, Macaulay reinforced confidence in
the inherited religious, social and political systems of the
period. Victorian imaginative writing is similarly laden with
attitudes that many readers of the day shared, though often
unconsciously. Contextualization helps a present-day reader
understand the role of literature in reproducing or criticizing
widely held values and beliefs.

It is important to think flexibly about Victorian cultural
contexts. There is no single Victorian 'frame of mind' or
'grand narrative' that serves as a 'key' for decoding literary
texts. The contexts we are about to consider reveal
fluctuating priorities and tastes in response to historical
changes of different kinds. Macaulay could optimistically see
his environment as one of continued 'improvement'.
However, a poet and critic of the next generation – Matthew
Arnold (1822–88) – could perceive only an impoverished
national spirit:

> these are damned times – everything is against one – . . . the
> spread of luxury, our physical enervation, the absence of great
> *natures*, the unavoidable contact with millions of small ones,
> newspapers, cities, light profligate friends . . . and the sickening
> consciousness of our difficulties. . . . (1996: 156)

As this observation demonstrates, nineteenth-century cultural contexts were sites of dialogue and opposition, rather than uniformity and consensus. Even contemporaries disagreed. Arnold mourned the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of his age, while the novelist Anthony Trollope (1815–82) felt his world 'less cruel, less violent, less selfish, less brutal' ([1883] 1974: 303–4).

The separation of contexts that follows – into the religious or political, for example – is something of an artificial device for organizing material. Throughout the period, the language and subject matter of different contexts intertwined in complex ways. A scientific topic might be presented through religious and political imagery, for example. Charles Kingsley (1819–75) argued that natural history developed 'that habit of mind which God . . . ordained for Englishmen', and was essential to 'the glorious work which God seems to have laid on the English race, to replenish the earth and subdue it' (1899: 308). While the topic is scientific, Kingsley's language actually promotes mainstream beliefs about what it is to be a 'normal' Victorian: energetic, knowledgeable and racially superior, with a mission to exert supremacy over the world. This mixture of discourses from different disciplines reinforces a particular view of nineteenth-century Englishness, while indicating that this identity is divinely sanctioned.

This example illustrates an important relationship between Victorian writing and Victorian culture. Victorian literature uses the rhetoric of many contexts to reflect and even redefine the culture of which it speaks. Art, politics, philosophy, religion, economics and science are all value-laden practices constituting the Victorian 'environment'. As an object of study, this cultural milieu incorporates multiple voices, competing for control over the shaping of knowledge, the interpretation of experience, and the formation of individual identities.

ARTS AND CULTURE: FORGING A NATION THROUGH TASTE

The public role of the arts

In Victorian society, the arts were viewed as an important sign of the nation's moral health and a vehicle for conveying social values. We can see this in the high visibility of the arts in the daily life of middle- and upper-class Victorians. Exhibitions were well attended. Trends in painting, literature and the theatre, as well as the pronouncements of artists, were widely discussed. Reviewers, academics, politicians, social commentators and members of the art community warred over subject matter, artistic style, changing tastes and the accessibility of the arts for new audiences.

From their immediate predecessors, early Victorians inherited a strong sense of the arts as a public institution defining national identity, whether this was through criticism or idealization. Cheap lithographs as well as expensive prints popularized work that had been influential in shaping British self-awareness, such as William Hogarth's eighteenth-century engravings (mocking the squalor and hypocrisy of contemporary London society), or the sublime, early nineteenth-century paintings of J. M. W. Turner (romanticizing the domestic landscape). Such seriousness was an expected component of art from the start of the period, evidenced in the taste for work in the 'grand style' – that is, formal, often large-scale, portrayals of classical, biblical and historical events, like Charles Eastlake's *Christ Blessing Little Children* (1839) and William Etty's *The Judgement of Paris* (1843). Yet early Victorians also set great store by sentimentality, catered for primarily in 'genre painting' – works featuring rustic, street and domestic scenes. Such touching examples as William Mulready's *Choosing the Wedding Gown* (1846) coupled charm with an obvious 'story' and simple, homespun lessons. In literary and visual work, moral weightiness and tender feelings were soon combined to instruct and move simultaneously. With its earnest tone, clear narrative line, contemporary

settings, drama and pathos, Victorian art became a persuasive communicator of significant beliefs and values.

The role of art in conveying national values is exemplified by the work of Edwin Landseer, one of the best-known Victorian painters by mid-century. While his portraits of Queen Victoria and the Royal Family were popular for their sugared idealization of domestic devotion, Landseer was particularly renowned for his anthropomorphic depictions of animals with 'personalities', in situations that invited either laughter or tears (Treuherz 1993: 29). However, he introduced a new epic quality in his paintings of the rugged Highlands and beasts engaged in the battle for survival. His famous studies of Scottish deer, *The Stag at Bay* (1846) and *The Monarch of the Glen* (1851), are accomplished renderings of the wild animal but also defining images of a native character appropriate to an industrialized age. They speak of the nobility of the free, self-reliant individual; they depict the heroism of competitive struggle, even if it brings death.

The Victorian arts celebrated the nation, but also expressed concern about its new directions. When delineating the detail of contemporary social life, literary and visual works often created the impression that the modern world was both exciting and risky. Charles Dickens's novels, *Bleak House* (1852–3) and *Little Dorrit* (1855–7), and William Powell Frith's panoramic painting, *The Railway Station* (1862), are similar in their presentation of the diverse characters of the Victorian metropolis, intermingling with, and even preying on, each other. Social evils were another popular subject for art that professed a public purpose. Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *Ruth* (1853), and Augustus Egg's three-painting sequence, *Past and Present* (1858), both commented on modern sexual morality, though the sympathetic portrayal of the fallen woman shocked their contemporaries. Exposure of topical problems remained a significant feature of the arts throughout the period, as illustrated by the studies of destitution in Luke Fildes's painting, *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874), and George Gissing's (1857–1903) novel, *The Nether World* (1889).

Victorian art history and criticism also engaged in social analysis. John Ruskin (1819–1900), the eminent critic, argued that art expressed a society's character and beliefs. In *The Stones of Venice* (1851–3), he suggested that artistic achievement was directly connected to the nation's ethical and spiritual health. Because Ruskin believed that art works conveyed cultural values, he was primarily concerned with their ideologies, even when discussing matters of form and technique, an approach typical of many Victorian reviewers of art and culture. Since only sound ideas would generate good art, the critic functioned as public custodian and promulgator of moral *and* artistic standards.

Promoting the arts and culture was viewed as a worthy enterprise that would educate the nation. Public spaces, including the Houses of Parliament (rebuilt after the fire of 1834), were decorated with uplifting murals by British artists. Wealthy industrialists and philanthropists in centres like Liverpool underwrote funding for museums and art galleries so the populace could learn about their cultural inheritance. Major public art exhibitions, such as those at the Royal Academy, were treated as important social events. Paintings were also routinely purchased for the nation. At all points, however, there was strict policing of subjects and style. From the scathing reviews of the Catholic content of Pre-Raphaelite paintings (Anon 1851: 8) to the outraged letter from 'A British Matron' to *The Times* (1885: 10) about paintings of nude females at the Summer Exhibition, a close watch was kept to ensure propriety and orthodox views were maintained.

The development of the National Gallery, under the direction of painter Charles Eastlake, is one of the most striking examples of the ideological role the Victorians accorded to the arts and culture. The Gallery was intended as a place of enlightenment for all classes. Its Trafalgar Square location, the generous opening hours and free admission ensured that its treasures were accessible to everyone, not just the privileged. There were, of course, problems with these open access arrangements. Some of the 3,000 visitors a

day seemed to view the gallery as a haven from inclement weather and a place to consume snacks, while the 'effluvia of so many human bodies' was thought to damage the varnish on the paintings (Robertson 1978: 95). Nonetheless, public attitudes to the acquisition policy illustrate Victorian cultural politics at work. Eastlake's leadership was central to 'elevating and purifying popular taste', because the collection recorded Western art history and provided a repository of perfect images that would inspire the nation and its artists (Robertson 1978: 80–1). Certainly, the Trustees, including the Prime Minister, Robert Peel, regarded the Gallery as a powerful instrument for shaping and controlling cultural ideals.

The arts and culture as commodities

Victorian art had an additional value among those with a strong investment in material luxury as a sign of social standing. The purchase of art, like the acquisition of commodities of all kinds, became a status symbol for the increasingly prosperous middle class. Connoisseurship demonstrated a refined and educated sensibility that could appreciate the products of imagination as well as of machines. Rich industrialists and professional men could afford to buy art, even if they did not have a prestigious family lineage and an inherited collection. Largely eschewing the 'Old Masters' and grand style favoured in aristocratic circles, middle-class purchasers forged a distinctive 'modern' identity by patronizing the work of living British artists, including Frith, Landseer and the Pre-Raphaelites (Lambourne 1999: 28–9; Treuherz 1993: 82–3). Their accessible subjects appealed to the self-made man with patriotic interest in national history and legend, tender feelings aroused by idealized views of women, children, pets and home, and a commitment to duty, honour and respectability. To a middle-class Victorian, contemporary art could be entertaining, reassuring and thought-provoking in its record of a vibrant social world and picturesque landscapes.

With Victorian Britain's rise as a world manufacturing nation, the arts and culture were exploited to assist the cruder processes of making and selling. Some commercial strategies seemed at odds with the notion of art as a superior form of cultural expression. In 1886, for example, when A. and F. Pears purchased the copyright of Millais's painting *Bubbles* (1865–6), to create an advertising poster for soap, the art community was appalled (Lambourne 1999: 180). Yet the venture successfully established strong 'brand recognition' for the product. Even more indicative of the commodi-fication of the Victorian arts and manufacturing crafts was the Great Exhibition of 1851. Promoted by Prince Albert and covering a 14-acre site in London's Hyde Park, the Exhibition brought together over 100,000 exhibits of the best inventions, designs and manufactured goods from every part of the globe, and particularly from the British Empire (Auerbach 1999: 9).

Spectacle was a central feature. The Exhibition was housed in the Crystal Palace, a specially designed building of glass and iron with an enormous vaulted roof that represented an amazing engineering feat in itself. Inside, the visitor could marvel at exotic fabrics and the stuffed elephant and howdah imported from India, wonder at the mock-up of a mediaeval court in Gothic style, purchase items like fine furniture, jew-ellery and ornaments, and, above all, be impressed by the supremacy of the host country. Raw materials from Britain and the Empire were exhibited, and their uses explained. Individual rooms were devoted to the most up-to-date technology, like photographic equipment, cigarette-making machines and microscopes. Over six million people visited the Exhibition, including one woman from Cornwall who was reputedly 100 years old (Auerbach 1999: 137, 148). Interest was stimulated by wide press coverage, and access facilitated by special trains that brought tourists from all parts of the British Isles to see it. Reduced-price 'shilling days' enabled working-class and country folk to share in this celebration of the nation's might and ingenuity. As a showcase for contemporary manu-facturing culture, the Exhibition confirmed Britain as the

world leader in trade, territorial expansion and advanced science and technology. Above all, the Exhibition made a deep impact on the mid-Victorian sensibility, encouraging patriotism, and associating the expansion of knowledge and the acquisition of material commodities with the excitement of a modern age.

New audiences

The Victorian enthusiasm for self-development through self-help stimulated new audiences for the arts and culture. Alongside existing educational centres like colleges, universities and fine art schools such as the Royal Academy, new institutions catered for those without the qualifications or wealth to enter the established centres. The National Art Training Schools of South Kensington instructed teachers in industrial and manufacturing design and craftsmanship. Throughout the country, adult education classes for working-class people, provided by the Mechanics' Institutes and other venues, offered 'amusement and information for the leisure hours of those who might otherwise have been exposed to the temptation of corrupt reading or bad company' (Newman [1873] 1964: 367).

One of the most important Victorian institutions to improve middle-class access to the arts and culture was the fee-based lending or 'circulating' library, epitomized by Mudie's Select Library, founded in 1842 by Charles Edward Mudie. Although a significant part of his stock was always dedicated to non-fiction, Mudie shrewdly exploited the keen interest of the public in the literary arts. He invested heavily in the latest novels and poetry, both 'popular' and high-brow. Membership was by subscription starting at one guinea a year (Griest 1970: 17), so that even students at the 'secular' University College London could afford to join. Between 1853 and 1862, Mudie increased his stock by over 950,000 volumes, and, in its heyday, his Library was said to have had over 50,000 subscribers (Griest 1970: 21, 79). Branches spread through London, and the firm shipped books to

readers in the provinces and colonies. Mudie's success and the entry of other strong competitors into this field (such as W. H. Smith's) indicate not only the importance of reading as a Victorian leisure activity, but also the numbers eager to engage with a broad spectrum of contemporary writing, especially fiction.

Mudie's influence on the literary arts stemmed from the commercial pressure he exerted by ordering multiple copies of works. For example, he negotiated a bulk rate for a purchase of 3,100 copies of *Silas Marner* (1861) by George Eliot (1819–80) (Griest 1970: 87). Because subscription fees related to the number of volumes borrowed at a time, Mudie and publishers both had an interest in maintaining the expensive 'triple-decker', the standard three-volume format in which most novels of the period were first issued. Rather like the paperback trade today, cheap single-volume editions (suited, for example, to the new phenomenon of the railway journey) were usually delayed until some time after three-volume publication.

Mudie's phenomenal purchasing power served as an indirect mode of patronage and censorship. Books bought *en masse* and advertised heavily became 'bestsellers' automatically. Moreover, the Evangelical Mudie had stern views about the content of the books; indeed, his firm's title – a '*Select* Library' – implied high and 'proper' standards. Sharing his subscribers' notions of respectability, he banned or withdrew works deemed lewd or unseemly, like George Meredith's (1828–1909) *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) with its plot about a wife who deserts her husband, and a marriage against parental wishes. Works were altered in draft to ensure they would not fall foul of his strictures. Anthony Trollope changed 'fat stomach' to 'deep chest' in his novel, *Barchester Towers* (1857), to avoid the kind of 'vulgarity' and 'exaggeration' that offended Mudie (Sutherland 1976: 27). The phenomenon of the circulating library is an excellent illustration of the way the new economics of Victorian mass-market publishing directly influenced artistic expression.

The arts, culture and victorian morality

Writers and visual artists who wanted to depict the gritty realities of contemporary life or challenge conventional attitudes were constrained by the general tone of self-righteousness that characterized middle-class culture. Some joked sardonically about the overbearing presence of 'Mrs Grundy', a character from an eighteenth-century play who objected to almost everything. Yet the hypercritical watchfulness that permeated both private circles and public life was disconcerting and depressing. In 1851, William Johnston described his age as one of apprehension: 'fear of the social circle, fear of the newspaper, fear of being odd . . . still greater fear of what somebody may say' (Houghton 1957: 398). To escape seeming an improper influence, authors used coded, indirect terms to express unorthodox attitudes, particularly in the handling of romantic liaisons and sexual conduct, cross-class relationships and Christian belief.

Numerous writers shared the loathing of heavy-handed censoring mechanisms, like Mudie's library, expressed by the novelist, George Moore (1852–1933), in *Literature at Nurse, or, Circulating Morals* (1885). Nonetheless, most Victorians believed the arts offered enlightenment of *some* kind. The critic and poet, Matthew Arnold, for instance, saw an opportunity for literature to replace Christianity as a source of spiritual understanding. While religious institutions lost credibility, Arnold believed that poetry would be able 'to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us' ([1888] 1911: 2). Arnold's influential theory established high culture as a bulwark against the deadening vulgarity of middle-class [philistinism] and moral prescription. Because culture encapsulated the 'best which has been thought and said in the world', it had moral weight and preserved universal values superior to any temporary preoccupation with appearances and manners ([1869] 1966: 6).

While it is often said, in retrospect, that Victorian artistic products are blinkered by prim moral and religious beliefs, many critics of the day saw matters differently, at least until the

final decades of the period. Arnold, for instance, advocated the liberal arts as the antidote to the prudishness and anti-intellectualism of his society with its 'preference of doing to thinking' ([1869]1966: 129). The popular Victorian precepts of duty and work, of '*strictness of conscience*' and 'self-conquest', he termed 'Hebraism' (132). To this he contrasted 'Hellenism', showing the high respect Victorian intellectuals had for Greek classicism with its '*spontaneity of consciousness*' that informed culture (132). 'Sweetness and light' were Arnold's metaphors for the '*inward spiritual activity . . . increased life, increased sympathy*' that the arts stimulated when taken seriously and that, in turn, nourished 'the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it' (64, 44). Because the arts would teach people to see truly, to discern hidden worth and to extend the reach of their sympathies, they would be central to the moral realignment of society.

Changing ideas about the nature and role of the arts

Even though Victorians relished debate about the role of the arts and culture, there was no consensus on the nature of the beautiful or the function of the artist. Tastes underwent dramatic change, as did assumptions about an artist's relation to society. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the skill of the painter or writer depended on competence in handling a range of stylistic devices, and in choosing techniques and genres appropriate to the chosen subject. These standards were widely accepted and institutionalized through reviews, critical writing, universities and national bodies like the Royal Academy. As well as inheriting respect for these conventions, early Victorian taste was shaped by two traditions in both literature and fine arts: the remnants of Neo-Classical formality with its structural regularities and classical topics and allusions; and the rich language, emotive tone and sublime subjects characteristic of Romanticism. Because both modes explored such central themes as the role of creativity and imagination, the importance of freedom and the nature of personal heroism, the

artist had significant status as the mediator of elevated truths and principles.

However, rapid social change, the challenges of everyday life in an industrial economy and new discoveries about the physical world gradually modified cultural tastes. By mid-century, the most admired works of visual and literary art seemed to engage directly with the 'real' world, largely through narrative forms. Embedded in a complex social milieu, the artist was expected to represent the immediate material environment and interpret its ramifications. John Ruskin, for example, urged painters to develop the analytical skills and knowledge of the scientist in order to convey the truth of the object portrayed, 'following the steps of nature and tracing the finger of God' (1903: 623). For the novelist George Eliot, the careful mirroring of 'real' social behaviour and thought processes in fiction was central to the artist's role as moral teacher. As she claims in *Adam Bede* (1859), the accurate representation of everyday experience enhances sympathy for 'the real breathing men and women, who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken, brave justice' ([1859]1980: 178).

From the 1870s, new Continental artistic movements influenced Victorian ideas about the beautiful, the artist's relationship to society and the role of culture in shaping public values. French Naturalism, transposed to a British scene by such writers as George Moore, was controversial because it investigated social relations and aspects of experience previously excluded from mainstream fiction, while its emphasis on the powerlessness of individuals seemed devoid of any uplifting moral purpose. French Symbolism challenged Victorian assumptions through style as well as subject. It replaced the detailed descriptions and explicitness of realist writing with bizarre, evocative images defying easy interpretation. Symbolist art revelled in mood rather than moral precept. Together these movements threatened to make British arts and culture a foreign territory that rejected Victorian beliefs, and many reviewers and members of the public objected to them.

By the 1880s, the 'art for art's sake' movement – known as Aestheticism – had introduced a new relationship of the arts to society. Initially regarded as a cult adopted by 'advanced thinkers' and avant-garde cultural rebels, Aestheticism focused on the beautiful form of the work and its sensuous and emotional effects, rather than on moral content. When the Aesthetic essayist, Walter Pater (1839–94), claimed that poetry was 'all literary production which attains the power of giving pleasure by its form, as distinct from its matter' ([1873] 1893: 244), he deliberately broke with the moral didacticism, high seriousness and public role which early and mid-Victorians had allocated to the arts and culture.

Although traditionalists denounced the theories of Aestheticism, the movement had a major impact on form and design, especially in architecture and interior decoration. In the 1860s, the design company of the writer, socialist and Pre-Raphaelite artist, William Morris (1834–96), had anticipated Aesthetic principles by privileging form for its own sake; his firm's striking motifs for textiles, wallpaper and stained-glass windows flattened and stylized natural shapes. The Arts and Crafts movement of the 1880s further developed Morris's love of mediaeval simplicity and stylization. However, under the influence of Aestheticism, the European 'Art Nouveau' movement of the 1890s made even more of 'form', rather than content and 'meaning', as the central interest in decorative arts. Sinuous, undulating shapes, repeated geometric patterning and fantastic elaborations replaced simple representationalism, as seen in the illustrations of Walter Crane and the dissolute drawings of Aubrey Beardsley. By the end of the century, even the most respectable middle-class drawing-room incorporated some element of this distinctively 'modern' taste in the arts.

Popular trends in arts and culture

Tracking the gradual shift in Victorian ideas about art – from idealization through realism to a delight in beautiful form for

its own sake – is to take a bird's-eye view. On the ground, as it were, most Victorians were more likely to engage with the arts through particular fads and fashions. Two were especially important for the shaping of the Victorian self-image: the taste for neo-mediaevalism and the Gothic, and the later passion for Orientalism.

The early and mid-Victorian delight in a fantasy recreation of the Middle Ages through the mimicry of visual and literary subjects and styles, clothing, architecture, interior design and ceremonials was evident in most Victorian cultural artefacts and practices: from church architecture and household furniture, to poetry and spectacular masquerade parties. The trend shows the Victorians were prone to define themselves by their cultural inheritance. From the 1840s through the 1860s, the Gothic Revival, stimulated by the architectural theories of Augustus Welby Pugin and the writings of John Ruskin, attempted to recover lost values through the imitation of past artistic forms. Pugin, for example, sought to reintroduce the Christian commitment of pre-Reformation England into Victorian society by reviving the architectural style of mediaeval churches. His Gothic decorations for the 1837 rebuilding of the (secular) Houses of Parliament illustrate how this fashion for mediaevalism expressed an idealized version of nationhood. The building's ornate detail aligned Victorian government with a romanticized British past, in which freedom replaced brutish feudalism and in which legislators were commanding, chivalric heroes. Alternatively, poets like Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–92) and William Morris used the Middle Ages – particularly the legends of King Arthur – to comment on contemporary life. Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859–85), for instance, suggested a number of parallels between the hopes and disasters of Camelot and Victorian ethical ideals and dilemmas. The poem remained upbeat in promising renewal from defeat, but suggested how easily virtues like duty, loyalty, love and self-discipline might be corrupted.

In the second half of the period, an interest in the Orient (in its broadest terms, non-Western cultures including the

Middle East and India as well as China and Japan) also influenced style and theme in the arts. The incorporation of Oriental designs and artefacts into furnishings, paintings, and even *The Mikado* (1885), a light opera by W. S. Gilbert (1836–1911) and Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900), signals curiosity about mysterious, foreign nations. However, as an artistic fashion, Orientalism promoted a particular view of the cultural Other. Representations of the Orient as a place of eroticism and primitive beliefs translated 'difference' as 'inferiority'. The absorption of Oriental details into Western art forms also implied the supremacy of Britain, which could reduce other cultures to exotic objects of inspection and exchange. When treated as luxury decorations, Oriental artefacts were silenced, becoming mere acquisitions rather than conduits of meaning in their own right. In the end, Orientalism offered reassurance about Victorian sovereignty rather than an open encounter with alternative viewpoints.

Popular culture

While these trends can be charted across the Victorian cultural scene as a whole, it is also possible to distinguish between cultural products in relation to the social groups that created and used them. What might be called 'high culture' intended for upper-class audiences – serious literature and theatre, the visual and plastic arts, quality newspapers, classical music – co-existed with more popular forms of entertainment associated largely with the working class. While many of these drew on contemporary middle-class preoccupations, such as patriotism and the marvels of modern science, they sometimes offered a sceptical interpretation of establishment authority, values and manners. Music hall performers, street entertainers and comic papers, for example, could rouse audiences with sentimental and jingoistic images, but they could also make light of the pretensions of 'toffs' and 'swells' in ribald ditties, skits and cartoons (Bailey 1998).

Many areas of popular culture that we would deem leisure activities – such as tourism, sport and reading – appealed to all classes, though not in a shared way. The working-class teetotaller might take one of Thomas Cook's recreational railway day trips for temperance groups, whereas the wealthy middle-class family would tour on the Continent. The middle-class reader who wanted to thrill to the secret crimes hidden behind the veneer of polite society might choose the sensation novels of Wilkie Collins (1824–89); the literate servant would find gore, shock and adventure in the luridly illustrated pulp narratives, called 'penny dreadfuls' and 'penny bloods' after their price and subject matter. Public spectacles, including balloon ascents, open-air concerts and puppet theatres, circuses and fairs, or venues like pleasure gardens, drew crowds from many walks of life. Certainly, middle-class Victorians all had some awareness of popular entertainment, as we can tell from literary work targeted at them. Charles Dickens regularly alluded to popular culture in his fiction and journalism, and exploited motifs and characters from them, as in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1) (Schlicke 1985: 87–103). Similarly, 1860s 'sensation fiction' drew on the topics, if not the rhetoric, of Victorian popular journalism that notoriously directed attention to the police cells, the divorce court and the lunatic asylum.

The blend between 'high' and 'popular' culture is just one indication of the many ways in which the Victorian arts provide both a mainstream and a shadow narrative of the period. Artists and writers produced positive images of their contemporary world, but also offered representations that pointedly revealed its failings and abuses. Creators and consumers of culture demanded high seriousness and moral probity, but also chafed against rigidity, righteousness and the policing of cultural and social boundaries. Whether enforcing or challenging artistic and social conventions, the arts and culture of Victorian Britain show us a society both confident and self-critical.

PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION: CHALLENGING CERTAINTIES

Religion and Victorian society

One of the most successful novels of the age, *Robert Elsmere* (1888) by Mary (Mrs Humphry) Ward (1815–1920), was about a young clergyman's loss of faith (Sutherland 1989: 539). The popularity of this now obscure work reminds us that Christianity was *the* most powerful cultural presence in the Victorian milieu. Its beliefs and values shaped social behaviour through emphasis on duty, self-sacrifice and sexual propriety. It structured leisure time, defining in many households what was read, said and done. Religious structures and terminology lie at the heart of the ideal Victorian family, with the *paterfamilias* as the patriarchal authority and the wife as the innocent 'angel' dedicated to his service. The Church offered professional career structures for men and, for women, a sense of purpose outside the home through philanthropic societies and projects.

The Protestant version of Christianity was a powerful cultural adhesive. The Anglican Church provided a spiritual power-base for the ruling class because it was the 'established' state church, regulated by Parliament and headed by the monarch. By displaying fervent religious commitment, the middle class legitimized its moral influence on the nation and the working class asserted its respectability and right to social inclusion. A Protestant foundation underpinned many charity and public schools as well as the great universities. Indeed, at Oxford, the required allegiance to the Anglican faith was not abolished until 1871 (Green 1974: 151). In the absence of state welfare, religious institutions helped care for the poor, and sought to reform the marginalized (as in the 'Magdalen' asylums for fallen women). Certainly, cant, hypocrisy and puritanical repression were also part of the religious context, as Charlotte Brontë (1816–55) suggested in *Jane Eyre* (1847) through the sadistic Reverend Brocklehurst and the frigid missionary, St. John Rivers. But whatever the scepticism about an

individual's religious sincerity or the validity of particular doctrines, Victorians inhabited an environment framed and interpreted by religious ideas and systems.

Religion and the reading public

Victorian reading habits largely reflected this religious ethos. It is claimed that 'sermons outsold novels' in the period (Houghton 1957: 21). While this is probably an exaggeration, religious works, such as the Bible and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678/84), figured prominently among the books in many Victorian homes (Cruse [1935] 1962: 17). Every denomination could count on a large readership for inspirational tracts, collections of hymns and theological articles. Even 'secular' periodicals, like *Punch*, published their fair share of writing on religious issues and displayed their own religious biases, anti-Catholicism being a favourite.

Writing for children frequently inculcated explicit religious principles, as in the cautionary tale of moral decline by Frederic W. Farrar (1831–1903), *Eric, Or Little By Little* (1858), and Charles Kingsley's fantasy, *The Water-Babies* (1863). In such juvenile literature, Christian precepts were entangled with respectable social customs and good manners for the instruction of youthful readers; religious belief was hard to separate from sound citizenship. Many literary works for adults similarly endorsed Christian teaching. For instance, Charlotte Yonge's (1823–1901) popular novel, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), and the religious lyrics of Christina Rossetti (1830–94) and Alice Meynell (1847–1922) portrayed suffering as God's will and forgiveness as the way to eternal reward. Writers who avoided explicitly religious themes often expressed a nominally Christian ethos. Charles Dickens employed the rhetoric of sin, judgement and forgiveness (Oulton 2003: 125, 133–5) in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and *Little Dorrit* (1855–7) in order to promote self-discipline, compassion and honesty as the basis of social justice. Dickens's representation of gender roles and

conduct, like the importance of female chastity, was also in keeping with Victorian Christian teaching.

Victorians who found religion painful or disquieting could turn to literature for reassurance. Historical novels about martyrs in the Early Christian Church, such as Charles Kingsley's *Hypatia* (1853) and Nicholas Wiseman's (1802–65) *Fabiola* (1854), encouraged religious perseverance. Combining gory sensations and spiritual inspiration in roughly equal measures, they disparaged nineteenth-century scepticism and greed by embedding these values in decadent 'pagan' cultures. Their lurid set pieces of heathen debauchery, sadistic torture and violent executions provided a chance to explore – and then condemn – erotic desires. The conversion novel, exemplified by John Henry Newman's (1801–90) *Loss and Gain* (1848), weighed up the profit and loss incurred by switching denominational allegiance or abandoning belief altogether. By showing converts' social dislocation and spiritual ecstasy, the genre reflected back to readers their own experience of the testing nature of faith in the nineteenth century. Later in the period, some authors presented doubt or disbelief as the 'modern' response to religion. James Thomson's (1832–82) poetic sequence, *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874), and Thomas Hardy's (1840–1928) last novels, including *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), provoked controversy by attacking religious hypocrisy head on, and questioning the Church as an authoritative vehicle of truth and social harmony.

Evangelicalism

Evangelicalism was the form of Protestantism that dominated religious thought. Associated in the eighteenth century with Nonconformist sects separate from the national (Anglican) Church, it taught that only faith could save sinners and that the Bible had absolute authority. In the Victorian period, most denominations evidenced some form of Evangelical enthusiasm, together with its characteristic emphasis on sin, reparation and personal salvation. The

belief and worship of the Anglican 'Low Church' party had an Evangelical nuance, while the extrovert piety of new devotional practices in the Roman Catholic Church paralleled Evangelical fervour (Heimann 1995: 170).

Evangelicalism shaped the nineteenth-century cultural imagination. Emphasis on the fallen nature of humanity etched introspection and guilt on the Victorian personality. Self-awareness meant knowing one's wickedness and being constantly attuned to the dangers of temptation that lurked everywhere. Personal conversion was the balance to such unworthiness, and its importance influenced Victorian attitudes to behaviour in many ways. Because pious, 'proper' conduct was a visible sign of conversion and redemption, the evangelically-minded middle class judged *any* departure from expected standards as a sign of spiritual failing. This is why they distinguished harshly between the 'deserving' poor (gainfully employed, dutiful and righteous) and the 'undeserving' (unemployed, idle and morally suspect). 'Signs' of the convert's change of heart were eagerly sought, since they confirmed 'election' in spiritual and social senses of the word. The earnest Miss Clack, in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), is a gentle caricature of the Evangelical enthusiast trying hard to save others by pushing uplifting tracts upon all and sundry. Evangelical conversion even provided the basis for the formulaic structure typical of Victorian autobiographical fiction and non-fiction: a crisis leads to self-loathing, contrition and a turning to new values.

Evangelical worship and teaching emphasized the emotional dimension of faith. For the average Victorian brought up in a family with Evangelical leanings, religion was 'a state of heart'; 'sudden, patent, palpable' feeling signified a sincere conversion (Gosse [1907] 1922: 180). Such attitudes encouraged the cultivation of the 'tender feelings' or 'moral sentiments' thought to inspire good conduct. For example, although the novelist George Eliot abandoned her Evangelical upbringing, she maintained that compassion and sympathy were central to social harmony. She wanted her readers to '*imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who

differ from themselves' (Eliot 1954: 111). The excess of senti-
mentality apparent in Victorian popular culture stemmed
from similar attitudes; it was not indulgence, but a desir-
able means of articulating 'shared moral feelings' (Kaplan
1987: 3).

The Anglican Broad Church

In addition to the 'Low Church' evangelicals, a Broad
Church party had emerged in the national Church by the
1850s. Favouring liberal theology over Evangelical dogma-
tism, Broad Churchmen, such as Thomas Arnold (of Rugby
School) and Benjamin Jowett (Master of Balliol College,
Oxford), took a moderate line on the Bible as an inspired
text, rejected 'superstitious' trappings like miracles and cere-
monials, and highlighted God's generous forgiveness rather
than His punishment for sin. Broad Church theology encour-
aged Christians to act in, rather than reject, the world. F. D.
Maurice's Christian Socialism advocated social and educa-
tional reform to create 'an organic Christian Society' (Wolff
1977: 269). Broad Church 'Muscular Christianity' promoted
the healthy, active body as part of God's creation. Indeed,
such religious teaching was central to Victorian gender con-
struction. In the writings of Charles Kingsley and in the
novel *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), by Thomas Hughes
(1822–96), manliness is synonymous with a strong, assertive
and heterosexual male body that could work God's purpose
in the world.

The Anglican High Church and the Oxford Movement

Downplaying the Evangelical emphasis on private judge-
ment for arriving at God's truth, the Anglican 'High Church'
wing focused on the Church's historical lineage and tradi-
tion, expressed through its ceremony, sacraments and rules.
In 1833, a group of prominent Oxford High Churchmen,
including John Keble, John Henry Newman and Edward
Bouverie Pusey, began publication of a series of reforming

Tracts for the Times (1833–41), and thus established the Oxford (or Tractarian) Movement. Wishing to free the Church from political interference, they argued that Anglican bishops inherited their power directly from Christ and His apostles, not from any monarch or parliament. Yet 'Apostolic Succession' inevitably associated the Church of England with its Early Christian, and hence Catholic, roots – an especially daring suggestion since Britain traced its constitutional freedoms to the Protestant Reformation. Castigated as misguided, if not heretical and dangerous, the Tractarians were further connected with a 'foreign' faith through 'Ritualist' followers who added elaborate Catholic ceremonial to Anglican worship. When John Henry Newman converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845, the nation was shocked, and Victorian cultural memory continued to bear the scars of this 'mistake' and 'misfortune', as Newman's decision was subsequently dubbed (Disraeli [1870] 1975: xiii).

Roman Catholicism

In Victorian culture, Roman Catholicism was the religious Other against which a healthy Protestant identity could be defined. Ideals of race, class, gender and nationality were reinforced through contrast to caricatured versions of Catholics as duplicitous, greedy, sexually abnormal, foreign in outlook and enslaved to the despotic Pope. Despite the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829) which had restored civil liberties to Catholics, they had difficulty integrating into mainstream culture. They had limited opportunities in professions like the military, could not attend Oxford or Cambridge, and were despised for their mysterious practices (like private confession), elaborate rituals and 'incredible' beliefs (like the transformation of bread and wine into the real body and blood of Christ in the Mass). Additionally, with its international network of missionaries, the Catholic Church rivalled the British Empire; and anti-Catholic propaganda suggested that it was only a matter of time before the old Roman enemy reasserted itself on British soil and

destabilized the Victorian way of life. When the Pope re-established the Hierarchy of Bishops in England in 1850, many suspected this 'Papal Aggression' was an insolent Vatican plot to undermine the nation, especially when one new diocese was titled 'Westminster', the seat of Parliament.

Wounds were kept festering by the publication of Newman's eloquent autobiography, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864), and by the steady leakage of Protestant converts to the Catholic faith, including the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89). Protestants were dismayed as Catholic numbers grew rapidly, increased especially by the influx of Irish immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s. Despite the gradual move of Catholics into the establishment during the period, prejudices remained. The anti-Catholic sentiments of Robert Browning's (1812–89) 'Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister' (1842) and Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* (1855) are still visible in Mary Ward's *Helbeck of Bannisdale* (1898), with its portrayal of a rigid Catholic.

The challenge to religious faith

Historical scholarship and scientific discoveries threatened the religious faith of many Victorians. By treating the Bible as an ancient document rather than God's revelation, the 'Higher Criticism' of French and German researchers challenged the accuracy of the Gospels and Christ's divinity. Sceptical 'biographies' of Christ, such as David Strauss's (1808–74) *The Life of Jesus* (1835–6), Ernest Renan's (1823–96) *Vie de Jésus* (1863) and John Seeley's *Ecce Homo* (1866), with their rational, evidence-based approach to Biblical history, seemed persuasive. When George Eliot translated Strauss's text in 1846, her doubts about the super-natural basis of Christianity were confirmed (Hodgson 2001: 6).

Advances in the natural sciences also undermined belief in the literal truth of the Bible. Geological discoveries suggested the earth predated any timeline that could be deduced from the Old Testament. Prehistory seemed a time of

monsters and chaos, not the orderly creation of all species in six days. Charles Darwin's (1809–82) *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) further eroded faith in God as Creator. Darwin's theories of adaptation and evolution suggested species developed gradually through chance and mechanistic natural laws, not by instantaneous Divine action.

Darwin's representation of natural history as a process of competition and 'survival of the fittest' cast doubt on God's Providential plan for humanity. As Darwin argued in *The Descent of Man* (1871), human beings were subject to the same evolutionary mechanisms as other species in terms of their origin from more primitive forms and their possible extinction. Such views were not entirely new. Tennyson's elegy, *In Memoriam* (1850), had incorporated similar fears, but Darwin's scientific approach seemed to provide tangible evidence for a non-religious interpretation of creation. *On the Origin of Species* kindled ferocious debate that set science and religion in opposition, hastened the advance of secularism as the dominant social framework, and influenced literary structures and themes.

Alternatives to orthodox faith

As religion gradually lost its authority, 'doubt' for some Victorians became a permanent spiritual state. The poet Arthur Hugh Clough (1819–61) suspended judgement and comment in an agnostic 'religion of silence' (Wolff 1977: 364), while others, such as Algernon Swinburne (1837–1909), openly flaunted disbelief. His 'Hymn to Proserpine' (1866) depicts Christ as a god of death and the rise of Christianity as a disaster for civilization. On the whole, however, atheism was a position kept quietly to oneself and one's closest friends, given the connection between religious orthodoxy and respectability in the period.

Some sustained hope in the supernatural and the afterlife by seizing on spiritualism and similar occult practices. Robert Browning satirized the famous medium, Daniel Dunglas Home, as a charlatan in 'Mr Sludge, "The Medium" ' (1864).

However, not even the proven existence of out-and-out fraudsters could dissuade many people from investing money and faith in the theatrics of table-rapping, séances, automatic writing and mesmerism to make contact with the 'other' side. Nor was this a fringe cult. Eminent members of the establishment and the scientific community, including Alfred Tennyson, John Ruskin, the politician, William Gladstone, and the psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud, supported the Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882 for the scientific investigation of occult phenomena (Oppenheim 1985: 135, 245). The Society is important, not only for indicating Victorian preoccupation with the supernatural, but also for illustrating increasing Victorian confidence in scientific observation, measurement and physical data to interpret experience and the environment.

Trends in moral philosophy

With theories of the soul in doubt, theories of the mind gained importance as a means of understanding and guiding human behaviour. Moral and metaphysical philosophy drew on new theories of consciousness that suggested a connection between the body and the mind. Philosopher-psychologists, such as Alexander Bain, argued that the nerves, emotions and will were central to influencing ethical conduct. Building on these insights and on the eighteenth-century philosophy of Sentimentalism with its confidence in the morality of 'the heart' (Kaplan 1987: 16), Victorians sought ways of cultivating the higher feelings, especially benevolence, as the basis of right action in private and public life.

The Positivist theories of the French philosopher Auguste Comte also integrated science and feeling. Concluding that advanced societies used 'positive', scientific laws, rather than supernatural explanations, to establish truth, Comte proposed the science of social phenomena, coupled with altruism, as the stimulus for reform. Agnostic Victorians, such as John Stuart Mill (1806–73), George Eliot and George Henry Lewes (1817–78), appreciated Comte's 'Religion of

Humanity' because it promised that moral, political and physical evils could be eradicated by a rational and sympathetic application of the laws of social development. By substituting Comte's 'scientific-humanist' philosophy (Wernick 2001: 2) for supernatural revelations, Positivists hoped to secure the benevolent outcomes of Christian ethics, even as faith itself waned.

Philosophic Radicalism and Utilitarianism

Philosophic Radicalism sloughed off all traces of religion in favour of reason in order to remake the social body. Early Victorian progressives, including John Stuart Mill, argued that the logical way of reforming society was to maximize individual freedom, minimize intervention from privileged authorities (like government) and ensure communal harmony through the carrots and sticks of self-interest, curtailing some personal liberties in order to protect others, such as private property and physical well-being. This philosophy had significant appeal, informing politics, economics and ethics and providing an ideological basis for individual self-development and self-management.

Philosophic Radicalism was itself heavily indebted to the Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). This rational philosophy, as pervasively influential as Evangelicalism in early Victorian Britain (Young [1953] 2002: 8), judged right and wrong by the pleasure and pain an act produced for the greatest number of individuals. Morality could be measured 'scientifically' by calibrating degrees of such pleasure and pain. 'Utility' guided the formation of laws in the same way. 'Good' sanctions were those useful for securing individuals' happiness. Religion was irrelevant, as were emotive appeals to innate human rights, which Bentham ridiculed as mere 'nonsense on stilts' (Atkinson 1905: 109). Taken to its logical extremes, Utilitarianism resulted in a blinkered addiction to facts and statistics and a cruel indifference to feeling and imagination, much as Charles Dickens satirized it in *Hard Times* (1854).

Even in the more humane version proposed by John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism embedded distaste for government interference in the Victorian psyche, particularly in relation to social welfare and economics. For Bentham, any reforms had to be grounded in open inquiry, factual data gathering, reports, legislation and inspection, rather than political horse-trading (Hoppen 1998: 95). His approach to social engineering revolutionized government administration, leading to numerous commissions on such diverse topics as trade unions and public schools. At its best, Utilitarianism thus suggested social progress depended on close attention to the lived experience and fulfilment of citizens.

The Utilitarian emphasis on individual self-interest, freedom and happiness had its popular expression in the Victorian obsession with individualism, which effectively became a doctrine of secular 'faith'. Given the middle-class confidence in personal effort and initiative as the means to success, it is not surprising that individualism shaped the ways such Victorians interpreted their place in the universe. Even science, such as Darwin's concept of the 'survival of the fittest', was harnessed to the individualist cause, justifying the need for each person to enter the competitive fray, to adapt, seize opportunities, get on or go under. Guidebooks that offered practical advice on self-development became extremely popular. Samuel Smiles' (1812–1904) famous manual, *Self-Help* (1859), is perhaps the best exemplar, and its construction of self-sufficiency as social duty is also characteristic of the Victorian view of individualism. For Smiles, national progress and personal 'industry, energy, and uprightness' were related: 'civilization itself is but a question of personal improvement' (1859: 2). In this way, individualism efficiently contributed to national 'vigour' and prosperity.

Some social philosophers, such as Mill, were certainly aware of tension between the dual Victorian passions for individual fulfilment and for social harmony and collective progress. His treatise, *On Liberty* (1859), acknowledged the need to balance self-assertion 'within the limits imposed by

the rights and interests of others' ([1859] 1991: 70). On the other hand, Mill felt that social conventions imposing uniformity of behaviour threatened individual development. Self-realization was an important principle in his argument for female equality in *The Subjection of Women* (1869).

The Woman Question

'The Woman Question' was how Victorians referred to the cultural upheaval that arose from women's changing expectations about their roles and possible destinies. In fact, the term says more about the patriarchal assumptions of the nineteenth century than it does about the 'question'. That women could be represented as an 'object' for dissection and analysis, and as a collective 'problem' for solution, demonstrates the way Victorian social structures and institutions tried to impose a single version of ideal femininity in the period, much at odds with women's own sense of their experience. In Victorian culture, women were idolized, protected and oppressed. The qualities of female innocence, purity and passivity that were routinely celebrated in written and visual culture and continuously reinforced through religious teaching, medical and psychological theories and the law, also 'justified' the exclusion of women from the institutions of power that shaped their futures.

At the centre of the bourgeois view of women was the philosophy of the separate spheres. In *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), Ruskin enthusiastically summarized this belief: women were best equipped for the private or domestic realm; and men were naturally suited to the active, aggressive and intellectual domains of public life, including commerce, government and the professions. In this gender ideology, biological difference, together with assumptions about the contrasting psychological make-up of women and men, fixed social expectations. Theories about women's bodies, innocence, emotional (rather than rational) temperament and maternal, self-sacrificing instincts underpinned the concept of the Victorian female presence as spiritually inspiring. Indeed, the

favourite metaphor for womanhood was the 'Angel in the House', a phrase adopted from the poetic sequence of that name (1854–61) by Coventry Patmore (1823–96).

In practice, as Florence Nightingale's (1820–1910) unpublished essay 'Cassandra' (1852) suggested, this flattering characterization of the tender feminine nature shackled middle-class women intellectually and forced them to attend to 'every trifler more selfish than themselves' ([1852] 1928: 401). They were 'protectively' enclosed in the home and subordinated to senior male figures: father and brothers when single, husband once married. Even in this 'natural' environment women lacked rights. When the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 made divorce more easily obtainable, the burden of proof needed by a woman against her husband was more extensive than that required by the husband against his wife. In the event of separation, a mother had few rights over her children. As late as 1878, she would be assured of custody of children under ten only if there had been ' "aggravated assault" by the father' (Basch 1974: 22). Until 1870, a married woman had no legal claims over her earnings or inheritance acquired after marriage; she gained rights over property and money she possessed prior to marriage only in 1882. Women's bodies were policed through social instruments, ranging from clothing fashions to the ready acceptance of sexual double standards which punished women, but forgave men, for erotic experience outside marriage.

Women had few opportunities to enter public life. They were excluded from higher education until the last quarter of the century, and did not have the right to vote. While working-class women out of necessity supported their families by labouring alongside men in factories, in the field, in service, or struggling with piecework, social pressure restricted middle-class women to domestic, 'nurturing' employment, such as teaching and the hated governess work that Anne Brontë (1820–49) described in *Agnes Grey* (1847). It was mainly in the literary arts, including scholarly writing and editorships, that women's public achievement

was acknowledged, partly because most women writers stuck to topics and genres deemed suitable to their sphere and expertise: the refined arts, the management of the home, love, courtship, marriage, family life and fidelity in the face of temptation. It was also because women's contribution in this field was undeniable. Eminent writers like George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61) demonstrated women's intellectual and artistic talents, while popular authors like Ellen (Mrs Henry) Wood (1814–87), Margaret Oliphant (1828–97) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835–1915) proved that women could succeed in the commercialized literary marketplace. These accomplished writers, journalists, reviewers and periodical editors handled the *business* of literature, negotiating with contributors and dealing with backers.

As shadowy, dependent presences in a society organized to sustain masculine power, Victorian women were inevitably judged by the reflected status of their male superior. A disgraced brother or failed father or husband was a serious social and financial impediment, as the Hales realize in Gaskell's *North and South* (1854–5). As exemplars of innocence, Victorian women were also judged by their own reputations. In matters of sexual conduct and social customs particularly, deviation was not permitted. A middle-class woman who engaged in sexual activity outside marriage faced exclusion – from fiancé or from husband and children, from the parental home, from friends and polite society. A Victorian 'fallen' woman might sink slowly into prostitution as the only way to escape starvation, unless, like the speaker of Amy Levy's (1861–89) 'Magdalen' (1884), she was taken into one of the asylums set up to 'rescue' and 'reform' such outcasts. Even women who stepped outside social convention in ways that seem to us unremarkable – in dress, speech, interests, through living a single life or campaigning to enter male preserves like the voting booth or the university – could expect criticism. Ridicule was heaped upon them by men who caricatured them as mad, wicked, foolish or ungrateful

and by female anti-feminists, like Eliza Lynn Linton (1822–98), who suggested their 'fast ways', 'want of high principle and absence of tender feeling' diminished women's cultural influence (1883: 5).

Despite disabling social structures, many Victorian women, especially middle-class women, were conspicuous achievers and inspired other women to struggle for greater freedoms. Even though the male establishment chafed at the large number of sad, 'redundant' spinsters who sought employment because they lacked husbands to care for (Greg 1862), women repeatedly proved they could succeed outside the domestic enclosure. Feminist organizations like the Langham Place Group formed by Barbara Bodichon, Bessie Rayner Parkes and the poet Adelaide Procter campaigned effectively to improve women's education and career prospects as doctors, clerks, bookkeepers, typists, hotel managers, telegraph operators, photographers, print compositors and shop assistants (Lacey 1986: 11–2; 258–67). Though women were not admitted to full degree courses in Britain until 1878 (at University College London), they showed their ability to take up advanced study at new female colleges established at Cambridge and Oxford from 1869. Formidable women exercised considerable public influence. The nurse, Florence Nightingale, the philosophic radical, Harriet Martineau (1802–76), and the travel writer and novelist, Amelia Edwards (1831–92), brought about the reform of medical services, the improved public understanding of politics and economics, and the professionalization of Egyptian archaeology respectively.

Philosophies of liberty, individualism and reform encouraged Victorian women to break out from a cultural position of weakness and function as free, responsible citizens by questioning and rejecting the gender ideologies imposed on them. Today, many of the achievements of these activists seem quite limited; but they also signify a remarkable revolution. By the end of the century, the image of the submissive 'child-woman' had been vanquished by a strong individual with a voice of her own.

POLITICS AND ECONOMICS: CONSENSUS AND CONFLICT

A volatile scene: political and economic divisions in early Victorian Britain

For most Victorians, the rhythms of social life seemed distinctly modern: exhilarating in their strangeness, but also stressful. While new economic and political theories promised tremendous possibilities, they also created intractable problems. In 1843, Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) denounced the 'Gospel of Mammonism' because the fevered drive for profits, based on the 'laws-of-war, named "fair competition"', created 'mutual hostility' between classes ([1843] 1965: 148). The Victorian metropolis illustrated this divisiveness. Friedrich Engels observed that, in Manchester, working-class areas were 'sharply separated' from middle-class districts, concealing from the wealthy of 'weak nerves the misery and grime which form the complement of their wealth' ([1845] 1920: 45, 47). The factionalized political and economic organization of early Victorian culture is visible in this spatial layout.

The eighteenth-century Industrial Revolution transformed Britain from an agricultural to a manufacturing nation, with a corresponding increase in urban population. However, Victorian know-how drove this change forward with unprecedented speed. In 1801, 66 per cent of the population of England and Wales was rural; by 1891, that figure had dropped to 25.5 per cent (Hoppen 1998: 12). The middle classes in particular thrived in a market-driven urban society, dependent on the supply of goods and services. Advocating an economy unfettered by regulatory mechanisms and taxes, they occupied cultural space previously held by the aristocracy. The financial power of merchants, industrialists and attendant professionals like bankers and lawyers, endowed them with social and political weight. The Birmingham metal manufacturing family, the Chamberlains, exemplify Victorian industrialists who entered local and

national politics in successive generations, securing power at the highest level, while pushing forward civic improvements.

Even though the upper class still dominated government circles, the financial clout of the middle class meant that the bourgeois outlook increasingly determined social and moral standards, fashionable manners and political and economic policies. Pivotal in Britain's material advance, the Victorian businessman and entrepreneur became the new hero in the narrative of the nation. However, his rise was paralleled by the emergence of the new industrial worker increasingly in conflict, rather than alliance, with employers. 'Horizontal' bonds of class replaced the notion of an organic social structure in which all functioned collaboratively. Interests of employers (or 'masters') and workers (or functional 'hands') seemed more likely to be resolved by a struggle for power than by consensus.

Politics, economics and the rise of the Victorian city

Economic factors altered the social geography of Victorian Britain. The 'supply-and-demand' cycle required an ever-larger market and a seemingly endless supply of 'hands' to service its needs. Urban centres provided both. In big metropolitan conurbations like London, as well as in the major factory towns, the population expanded at a remarkable rate as steam machinery increased the scale and speed of manufacturing. Cities absorbed displaced country labourers, the unemployed from small towns and villages, and Irish immigrants seeking to escape the potato famine (1845–9). With their fast-paced way of life, these crowded centres exuded a distinctively modern energy, focused on the creation of wealth.

However, there was a bleak underside, also closely connected to the economic system. Urban infrastructures quickly became inadequate. Roads were congested and filthy, depositories for horse-droppings and rubbish. Rivers were polluted by factory waste and human sewage. Overcrowding, dilapidated housing, inadequate drainage and water supplies,

vermin, dirt and poor food characterized life in the working-class ghettos. Diseases, including cholera and tuberculosis, industrial injuries and work-related illnesses like emphysema were common. The competitive economy was subject to frequent fluctuations, from boom through stagnation to bust. This fluidity made workers' wages undependable, forcing many into lives of criminality and vice simply to survive. As a shirt-maker testified, 'it was the low price paid for my labour that drove me to prostitution' (Mayhew 1971: 150). With its elegant townhouses and squalid slums, the Victorian city was a tangible manifestation of the disparities that arose from the new age of industrial capital.

From a political point of view, the problem of poverty seemed insuperable. Early in the period, Lord Melbourne, the Prime Minister, reputedly quoted Walter Scott to Queen Victoria when she expressed concern: ' "Why do you bother the poor? Leave them alone!" ' (Cecil 1953: 88). Yet even Melbourne had conceded that, from the perspective of public spending, he did indeed need to 'bother' the poor. His English Poor Law Reform Act in 1834 cut back local parish relief for the indigent, tying assistance to the dreaded work-house, with its punitive separation of the sexes and humiliating, prison-like regimes. *Oliver Twist* (1837–9) was Charles Dickens's attempt to expose the horrors of this particular policy, provoking Melbourne's petulant complaint that the book focused too much on 'workhouses and coffin makers and pickpockets . . . I don't like them in *reality*, and therefore I don't wish to see them represented' (Cecil 1953: 85–6). Yet they existed nonetheless, and as local authorities struggled to build workhouses and continued to dole out emergency benefits to the destitute, many died of starvation.

Poverty and inhuman conditions in workhouses, sweat-shops, factories and mines stirred the national conscience, sensitized by campaigning novels like Fanny Trollope's (1780–1863) *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1839–40). However, these circumstances also generated fear. Economic depression in the 'Hungry Forties' brought the possibility of class conflict to the fore, especially

as the disadvantaged workers gathered together in towns and cities seemed particularly prone to unrest. Well before 1848 and the Year of Revolutions on the Continent, W. Cooke Taylor was filled with 'anxiety and apprehension' when visiting Lancashire factory towns. The crowds seemed to express 'something portentous and fearful' (1842: 5).

Taylor termed these workers an 'aggregate of masses', illustrating how middle-class Victorians often saw the working class: anonymous, unknown but powerful and, possibly, sinister. The poor could retreat into slums as into 'some huge and intricate forest' with 'recesses in which every abomination may be practised' (Vaughan 1843: 225, 224). Their territory was a source of social contamination, with slum diseases providing yet another image of their danger. They threatened to spread dissatisfaction and degradation like typhus, 'a pestiferous moral exhalation dangerous to all other classes of society' (Miall 1849: 350). Middle-class Victorians could tolerate 'deserving' workers with gainful employment, a respectful attitude to the owners and institutions of capital, and a willingness to work hard to survive. However, they were increasingly disquieted by a working class that asserted its own, separate identity and seemed to resent existing economic and political structures.

Victorian political and moral economies

A *laissez-faire*, or non-interventionist, monetary system was at the heart of the class-based social structure. Government interference through taxes and tariffs was resisted; confidence was placed in free competition, private property and individual entrepreneurship. Aggressive economic practice in which only the 'fit' were expected to survive was grounded in the new science of political economy. Widely acclaimed for its rationality, political economy applied so-called 'natural' and historical laws of growth, decline and social behaviour to national and private-sector economic trends and policies. It advocated rigid adherence to the rule of supply and demand, despite the suffering of those who lost

their jobs as markets stagnated or found their wages cut to meet increased competition. The ways in which different classes were understood and represented were derived from political economy, especially from its reliance on personal responsibility and effort. Because risk-taking, self-help, hard work and individual enterprise all served the demands of the marketplace, these qualities were incorporated into definitions of both the conscientious, patriotic worker and the successful industrialist and professional.

Not all Victorians were impressed by this capitalist model, however. As Carlyle complained, it threatened peaceful consensus because the ethic of 'Cash-payment . . . absolves and liquidates all engagements of man' ([1843] 1965: 148). Many cultural critics, including John Ruskin, worried that society at large seemed indifferent to the antagonism and injustice arising from these principles. Blind trust in political economy had created a secular 'religion' devoted to the worship of 'the "Goddess of Getting-on", or "Britannia of the Market"' (Ruskin 1905: 448). To the observant, this economic system created a seemingly inevitable conflict between self-interest and social responsibility.

Victorians used a variety of representational strategies to square this particular circle. For example, the concept of the 'gentleman' was actively promoted through education, religious teaching, the arts and even recreational activities like sport. As Pip learns in Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–1), there is a difference between the true gentleman at 'heart' and the pseudo-gentleman in 'manner'. Only the former embodies genteel values that prove to be unrelated to wealth. A 'real' gentleman, rich or poor, would demonstrate a sense of fair play, kindness to those less fortunate, respect to those in authority, self-sufficiency and earnest endeavour. Vaguely attached to a sense of personal improvement but essentially conservative in its allegiance to the existing social structure, the 'gentleman' archetype was a potent way of suggesting individual fulfilment was compatible with social obligations and that responsible, dignified behaviour could be expected of those without money and rank.

Explicit arguments on behalf of a *moral* economy in which social justice balanced wealth creation were another way of addressing these economic contradictions, as evidenced in James Anthony Froude's (1818–94) *The Nemesis of Faith* (1849). This novel attacked a predatory system in which the rich man snatched 'the spoils of others' labour . . . skilfully availing himself of their necessities' while shutting 'up his heart against their cries to him for help' ([1849] 1988: 47). More subtlety was employed – but to the same effect – in fiction that explored what Carlyle termed the 'Condition of England' ([1843] 1965: 7) (see Chapter 2). Writers such as Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81) movingly described the suffering of the working poor in their fiction, while they quietly asserted the inherent decency of middle-class heroes and heroines. By appealing to readers' pity and sympathy, they put the case for reform on a personal as much as on a political footing.

Largely in response to increased publicity about the misery of the poor, some voluntarily provided philanthropic aid. Such action sought to improve working-class conditions, not by changing the political and economic system, but by recourse to more tenuous concepts of personal empathy and humane treatment. As John Ruskin argued, justice in the relations of 'master and operative' depended on 'such affection as one man *owes* to another' ([1860] 1862: 6). Paradoxically, however, Victorian theories of social welfare often shared the assumptions about self-help and the work ethic that underpinned political economy. The destitute – not social structures – were usually the focus for reform. As late as the 1890s, for example, William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, devised a paternalistic rescue plan for the benighted poor – not of Darkest Africa and the 'uncivilized' reaches of Empire but, ironically, of 'Darkest England'. It entailed 'creating in them habits of industry, honesty, and truth' and 'exporting' them to the colonies 'so laying the foundations, perchance, of another Empire' (1890: 93).

Victorian politics at home

Party politics in the period was a decidedly complex affair. Prior to Victoria's reign, Parliament had been effectively a closed shop for the ruling classes. The First Reform Act (1832), which modestly increased the electorate, meant politicians now needed to win voters' support, though without making promises that would damage the economic and social status quo. Throughout the period, therefore, political parties reorganized to differentiate themselves more clearly from opponents and to enhance their appeal to the electorate. Consolidation of party interests along class lines is one narrative of Victorian politics: the unification of the (progressive) Whigs and (reforming) Radicals in the middle-class Liberal party dominated by Gladstone; the emergence of modern Conservatism led by Disraeli, whose patriotic support of traditional institutions and monarchy appealed particularly to the landed gentry and aristocracy; and the formation of the Labour Party under Keir Hardie at the turn of the century. Yet these party alignments are only one dimension of a fraught and fast-moving political scene, characterized by disruption and agitation and often driven by public anxiety and dissatisfaction.

Law-breaking and vice were subjects of continued concern which politicians were expected to address. Various measures were attempted. Middle-class neighbourhoods were gated to prevent the intrusion of unwelcome vagrants and criminals (Wilson 2002: 383). The Metropolitan Police Force, established by Robert Peel in 1829, concentrated on restraining the urban working class and ensuring that prostitutes, thieves and 'roughs' did not disturb public order. However, this heavy-handed approach increased resentment towards the establishment and the politicians; 'bobbies' or 'peelers' encroached on the personal freedom of the poor in ways that only exacerbated social tensions. Evidence of middle-class corruption added to public disquiet, undermining confidence in the innate respectability of the bourgeoisie. Its visibility in popular 'sensation fiction' by Wilkie Collins,

Charles Reade (1814–84) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon in the 1860s (see Chapter 2) reinforced a sense of the fragility of a society riven by individual greed, ambition and gullibility.

Activist campaigning, such as agitation for political empowerment through democratic reform, was a further reminder of social divisions. For example, the Chartist Movement, incorporating a variety of workers' groups, published a 'People's Charter' in 1838. It advocated such measures as the secret ballot and universal male suffrage. As the future Conservative Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, suggested in his novel, *Sybil* (1845), Chartism stemmed directly from the economic divisions between the rich and the poor who formed '[t]wo nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy' and who were demonstrably 'not governed by the same laws' ([1845] 1920: 76). Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* (1850) depicted many Chartists as peaceful; but the movement was associated in the public mind with radical extremism. The high profile of their campaigns, including a petition to parliament with over one million signatures, the aggressive rhetoric of their songs and propaganda pamphlets and their support for strikes and (by some) more violent action, convinced many that the Chartists intended to destroy the social fabric in the name of political freedom. Lord Macaulay, for example, judged their desired reforms to be 'incompatible with property, and . . . consequently incompatible with civilization' (1880: 183). Although Chartism itself collapsed by the late 1840s, outbreaks of unrest continued, including the Hyde Park riots of 1866 (when over 200,000 electoral reform supporters agitated for the right of mass assembly) and the 1887 'Bloody Sunday' Trafalgar Square riots against unemployment (Newsome 1998: 48). Such public disorder ensured that conflict as much as consensus remained an ever-present possibility in a society 'of Money and of Hunger', of 'Drudges' and 'Dandies' (Carlyle [1833–4] 1937: 286).

Politicians responded to campaigns seeking improvement in virtually every cultural domain – from public health to electoral reform, from employment conditions to family law,

from vivisection to education. The Second Reform Act (1867), on which George Eliot's *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866) indirectly comments, enfranchized all men renting or owning property valued at over £10 (that is, virtually all male urban-dwellers). The Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 gave women control over their assets and earnings. Before this, the plots of many novels had turned on the marriage of convenience and the plight of women pursued and abused by fortune-hunters, ranging from Anthony Trollope's *The Newcomes* (1853–5), to Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–60) and Dinah Mulock Craik's (1826–87) *A Noble Life* (1866). The Education Act of 1870 set up school districts and encouraged the building of primary schools. Education up to the age of 10 was made compulsory in 1880 and free in 1891. The Public Health Acts of 1848, 1872 and 1875 improved urban conditions by ensuring state oversight of fresh water supplies, drainage and sewage disposal. As mundane as sanitation reform might seem, it was an important signal that government accepted responsibility for the well-being of all citizens.

While these laws might give the impression that the ethos of Victorian politics was one of pro-active reform, many legislative changes were as much about compromise as permissiveness. Control through conciliation is apparent, for example, in the abolition of the protectionist Corn Laws (1846). While the Laws harmed the poor by keeping bread prices artificially high, their repeal mainly appeased middle-class employers who favoured all-out competition in an unregulated marketplace. Another example is the slow progress made on the extension of the franchise and electoral redistribution. The first Reform Act of 1832 was intended to quell unrest among the majority of the country (who had no voting rights) by reorganizing constituencies more fairly and modestly increasing the electorate, a benefit primarily for the middle class. Subsequent electoral acts did spread democratic participation but continued to exclude women, implying they might not be relied upon to preserve the (patriarchal) status quo.

A similar effect can be seen in laws pertaining to sexual conduct. By the 1880s, public sex scandals (ranging from homosexual brothels to evidence of sex traffic in young girls) had heightened panic about declining moral standards. Law – like medicine – was therefore brought to bear on the 'normalizing' and strict policing of sexual orthodoxy. The Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 reconfigured the cultural understanding of homosexuality by focusing on male same-sex practices (rather than on particular sexual acts per se) and broadening definitions of criminal 'gross indecency' involving men. Erotic preference and sexual identity, rather than actions, now became the object of investigation and punishment. As a result, writers exercised even greater care in representing unconventional sexualities, and the public scrutinized work with even greater suspicion. For example, one reviewer condemned Oscar Wilde's (1854–1900) *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1) for its inclusion of 'matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department' ([1890/1] 2005: xviii). When the new Act was invoked in 1895 to prosecute Wilde for homosexual practice, it was clear that politicized mechanisms would be imposed to control 'unruly' private desires.

Labour relations

The theory of political economy suggested that the risky battles of the marketplace were both an ennobling test of character and the inevitable cost of personal and national progress. The same ideas indicated 'labour' was the naturally ordained state of the working classes and their route to advancement and satisfaction. In 1834, Commissioners inquiring into the Poor Laws concluded labourers' contentment 'increased with their industry' (Young and Handcock 1956: 700). A factory inspector took exactly the same line in 1852, asserting both adult and child workers 'never were so well off' since they had employment, cheap food, clothing and entertainment, and 'time for some mental improvement' (Young and Handcock 1956: 992). The economic *realities*

for wage-earners proved otherwise. Brutal tactics were employed to increase profits and cut costs, including wage reductions, excessive working hours, harsh penalties for recalcitrance and the use of strike-breakers. Some employers took the interests of the work force seriously and improved housing, wages and conditions; yet there were many more who exploited their employees and stifled dissent, blocking co-operative support groups and trade unions.

The opposition of 'master' and 'men' became a familiar antagonism, embodied not only in novels like Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), but also in the language of heavyweight economic analyses, government reports and popular essays. From 1850, English readers could consult a translation of *The Communist Manifesto* with its exhortation to all workers to unite because they 'have nothing to lose but their chains' (Marx and Engels [1848] 1930: 68), but on the whole, English trade unions tended to be unrevolutionary, local groups, established to protect wages. Nonetheless, they were objects of much middle-class suspicion. Because they challenged preconceptions about the natural justice of private ownership and the balance of industrial and economic power, they were felt to foster 'a spirit of antagonism' and to interfere with the comforting stereotype of the sturdy, self-reliant and respectful British workman, as a Royal Commission suggested in 1869:

> The desire of the workman to excel, to do the best in his power to give satisfaction to his employer, to improve himself, and if possible to rise in the world, is damped by the thraldom in which he is held to the rules of his union. (Young and Handcock 1956: 1005)

The union 'persecution' of workers who did not wish to join – the central narrative impetus of Charles Reade's novel, *Put Yourself in His Place* (1870) – also made the public mistrust employee groups. The London Dock Strike of 1889 in a sense realized middle-class fears; it illustrated just how much force could be exerted by co-ordinated working-class action

to improve conditions and pay. The formation of the Fabian Society in 1884, the Socialist League in 1885 (led by William Morris) and the Independent Labour Party in 1893 marked the institutionalization of a distinctively working-class voice in the formal political spectrum of Victorian life. From this point, the conflict between classes deepened into a struggle over the social principles that should shape Britain's transition to a new century.

Ireland

The Irish Question factionalized Victorian political parties and plagued Prime Ministers who tried various tactics to pacify and subdue a community divided by religious, economic, political and cultural differences. The majority Catholic population in Ireland resented their poverty, limited opportunities and rule by a distant, Protestant colonizer – Westminster. They bitterly eyed the prosperity of the local Protestant establishment or 'ascendancy' (even though that was in fact waning throughout the nineteenth century). Such discontent raised the threat of rebellion that could spread to mainland Britain. The government attempted some conciliatory measures, such as modest financial relief to sufferers during the Irish potato famine of 1845–9. However, the public had scant sympathy. The destitute Irish who came to Britain in the wake of the famine simply reinforced a sense of Ireland as a land of wretched troublemakers. Seeking jobs at a time of economic depression on the mainland, when even the British workforce was hard pressed to find employment, they were reduced to begging and stealing, or were socially isolated in the most menial jobs and the most degrading slums.

By the 1880s, a political solution to the campaign for Irish independence was urgent. Irish nationalists used many strategies to force the hand of the British Government, as suggested in Trollope's unfinished novel *The Landleaguers* (1882–3). Civil action, including rent strikes and harvest boycotts, escalated to assassinations in Ireland and bombings

on the mainland, including London, Salford and Glasgow. Prime Minister Gladstone favoured the Home Rule project of the Irish politician, Charles Parnell. It satisfied the Irish desire for self-government by granting the country its own parliament; but it gave Westminster continued control over Irish defence, foreign affairs, trade and customs and excise. Ultimately, political consensus on Ireland proved impossible to achieve. In fact, Irish nationalism disrupted British political stability by splitting the Liberal Party in 1886, and bringing it to defeat at the polls. Public opinion, though divided, in the main turned its face against Irish political and electoral reform. Bent on retaining, not sharing, power, Victorians were by and large prepared to sacrifice Irish freedom for the appearance of national cohesion.

Victorian politics abroad

Victorian Britain proclaimed its right to oversee world affairs. Patriotic fervour, visible in the cartoons and songs of popular culture and in establishment rhetoric, was just one way of asserting this authoritative global presence. A combative foreign policy also helped to secure Britain's international dominance and grip on foreign markets and raw materials, notwithstanding the territorial ambitions of the German Empire and Russia. British politicians were not averse to meddling – or threatening to meddle – in the internal affairs of foreign countries on the grounds of supporting freedom, while actually protecting British interests, as in the wars with China over the profitable opium trade.

However, the Crimean War (1854–6) had an ambivalent impact on the public perception of foreign policy. Hoping to curb Russian expansion, Britain joined France to support Turkey in her war with Russia. The Anglo-French campaign in the Bosphorous was technically successful, but devastating in terms of its operation: tactically ill-prepared, poorly equipped and badly led (one British general, a veteran of Waterloo, habitually referred to the French allies as 'the enemy') (Wilson 2002: 179). Many more British troops died

from disease, especially cholera, than were killed in battle. Strategy was recklessly conceived and poorly executed. Tennyson's poem, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' (1855), immortalized an act of valour during the Battle of Balaclava; but in reality it resulted from muddle and misjudgement on the part of the officers.

Public response to the War was mixed. The defeat of Russia and the incidents of daring against the odds bolstered Britain's self-image as the international scourge of tyranny. But the war was also the first campaign abroad to be covered by specialist correspondents, notably William Howard Russell of *The Times*. His impressions of horrific battles and the grisly conditions, which he telegraphed home, aroused considerable disenchantment with the military command responsible for needless illness, suffering and death. On one front only did the war really push culture forward. By generating favourable publicity for the nursing practices of Florence Nightingale, it furthered her campaign to professionalize nursing care and reform the Army Medical Service.

Empire

Modern historians are divided about the extent to which the average Victorian working-class man or woman knew and cared about the details of the imperial project, although postcolonial critics have shown how it permeated Victorian literature from Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) to the work of Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), H. G. Wells (1866–1946) and Joseph Conrad (1856–1924) at the turn of the century. Certainly, patriotic rhetoric was upbeat about British 'ownership' of vast regions, like Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and of enormous populations, like those of India. Victorian maps, dominated by the colour pink signifying British territorial holdings, also provided visible confirmation of power because the Empire demonstrably encircled the globe. When in 1876 Disraeli announced Queen Victoria would be known as 'Empress of India', he flattered the monarch but also reinforced the average Victorian's sense of

British supremacy. News of the unusual sights, peoples and customs across the Empire filled the columns of newspapers and magazines, stimulating curiosity about other cultures and encouraging the growth of human and social sciences like anthropology. There were career opportunities for all classes in colonial administration, imperial building and engineering schemes, importing and exporting businesses and in the army and navy that kept order on land and sea. Emigration to distant colonies offered many families chances for property and wealth that were beyond their grasp in Britain. Empire seemed to benefit everyone. As the journalist and explorer Henry Stanley cheerfully reminded a Chamber of Commerce meeting, industry profited from the manufacture of 'trinkets that shall adorn those dusky bosoms'; God and the colonized profited from missionaries' efforts 'to bring them, the poor benighted heathen, into the Christian fold' (Newsome 1998: 136). Today, it is apparent that such discourse concealed racial prejudice, economic exploitation and the erosion of other cultures by the forced implantation of British religion, education and law.

The peace that Empire 'guaranteed' existed more in the cultural imagination than in fact. In 1857 Indian soldiers rebelled against British commanders when particular orders insulted their religious beliefs. The atrocities perpetrated during the year-long Indian Mutiny drove home the fragility of Imperial rule. As a result, Whitehall tightened its grip on colonial governance, seizing control of India from the private East India Company, a huge trading organization that had previously run the country. From the 1860s national uprisings, wars and disputes in regions as diverse as New Zealand, Western Canada, West Africa and Malaya continued to test Britain's political will and military prowess. Increasingly, the imperial experience was connected with bloodshed, high expenditure and the growing restlessness of the colonized who often experienced Empire as alienating, degrading and oppressive. The power of these resentful and mysterious subjects became a source of anxiety as the period drew to a close. 'Reverse colonization', the destruction of the

mother culture by the dangerous and intrusive immigrant, became a popular theme in fantasy novels of the 1890s, including Bram Stoker's (1847–1912) *Dracula* (1897) and Richard Marsh's (1857–1915) *The Beetle* (1897).

The 1899–1902 Boer War in South Africa ignominiously reversed the magic of imperial adventure, previously epitomized in novels like H. Rider Haggard's (1856–1925) *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and in the real-life gold and diamond mining exploits of Cecil Rhodes. The campaign against the Dutch-descended Boers for possession of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal was technically successful, and Britain gained supremacy over a unified South Africa. But what lay beneath the bravado and celebrations at home in 1902 was a new vision of Empire captured in photographs and the accounts of volunteer relief workers: the ruthless General Kitchener's concentration camps, populated by starving and dying Boer women and children; a scorched earth devoid of crops and livestock; and extensive casualties on both sides (Judd and Surridge 2002: 187–96). Even under the consensus of patriotism, by the turn of the century serious moral fissures were undeniably apparent in the management of colonization and the expansion of Empire.

The mixed experience of imperialism – optimism and opportunity on the one hand, brutality and conflict on the other – is replicated throughout the Victorian cultural milieu. Politically, the period gave new opportunities to the ordinary individual. Reforms, including the introduction of the secret ballot and the extended franchise, more permissive legislation on property rights and family relationships, and improvements in public health and education, show a significant attention to the interests of the common people as well as to the ruling elite. By the time of Victoria's death, even the working classes could feel that they had a greater stake in the making of the nation. Yet the turn of the century could not really be faced with equanimity. Squalor and dehumanization were as apparent in 'darkest England' as in the far reaches of Empire. Participation in political and economic processes was still blocked for large sections of the

community, including women. Those who moved too far outside cultural borderlines, or who argued for more radical freedoms, were unlikely to flourish. Dilemmas and friction seemed the dominant Victorian legacy to a new century.

DEVELOPMENTS IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: THE KNOWLEDGE REVOLUTION

The democratization of science

In 1850, Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, made a speech extolling the virtues of science and technology. By discovering 'the laws by which the Almighty governs His creation' and using these 'to conquer nature', scientists discharged 'a sacred mission' as 'divine instrument' (Albert 1862: 111–2). Considered in hindsight, this part of Albert's message was somewhat askew since Victorian scientific discoveries gradually eroded confidence in 'the Almighty'. Yet the Prince *did* put his finger on a very important feature of nineteenth-century science: its widespread dissemination and use. Understanding of the universe was no longer restricted to a privileged few. Even though the pace and volume of discovery made specialization inevitable, new scientific insights became 'the property of the community at large' (111).

Technological advances changed industry, stimulating the search for new products to consume as well as new means of manufacturing them quickly, cheaply and in volume for a mass market. But the 'community at large' experienced the knowledge revolution more directly. Scarcely a single aspect of daily life was untouched by science and technology. New modes of transportation, especially the railway, altered the relation of town and country, created a tourist industry, introduced ordinary people to their heritage and geography. Innovations in medicine changed forever the experience of illness, pain and death; inventions like the telegraph transformed communications; and safety was improved by such

developments as electric street lighting from 1878. The human and social sciences provided insight into individual behaviour and the social environment. Even leisure activities, like photography and magic lantern 'slide shows', depended on the application of optics, chemistry and physics.

The 'democratization' of scientific knowledge also shaped the Victorian imagination, arousing intense curiosity about the material world and its workings. Scientific lectures and demonstrations and popular science articles in mass-market publications reached a significant portion of the community. The discourse of science inflected language and literature. A detailed attention to 'data' and 'facts' in part explains the Victorian love of history, biography and elaborate material details in fiction. Indeed, the very precision of scientific language implied a mastery of matter and thus the potential to regulate every aspect of experience. As the Darwinian biologist and science educator, Thomas H. Huxley, predicted, knowledge of the physical conditions of the universe 'may, in future, help us to exercise the same kind of control over the world of thought, as we already possess in respect of the material world' (1893: 164).

The professionalization of the sciences

New discoveries revolutionized the way the scientific community defined and practised its own disciplines. The professionalization of the sciences was a major phenomenon, evidenced not only in the growth of specialized fields, but also in the development of high-level training programmes and career paths on a par with traditional academic fields such as classics and philosophy. By the 1860s, major public schools, including Rugby and Harrow, incorporated scientific studies in the curriculum, and students could take Natural Sciences at Cambridge. Technological research was pursued in universities, and important academic links were made with major industrial firms (Hoppen 1998: 308–9). Overall, increased authority was vested in science as a cultural discourse.

Sciences of origin and human development

The Victorian discovery of mechanical and natural laws that accounted for the operations of matter profoundly altered intellectual life. Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–33) and Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) posed new questions about the origins and age of the Earth and the laws by which it evolved. Evidence of fossil remains and of slow natural processes like erosion suggested a lengthy historical process in which God's role was indistinct. Through biology and natural history, Charles Darwin filled out this account of creation as a mechanical operation dependent on a mixture of fixed laws and chance.

As a naturalist on a survey ship in 1831, Darwin had made a detailed study of geological features and flora and fauna in such places as the Galapagos Islands, establishing how particular organisms had 'mutated' in response to different environments and passed on their 'alterations' to subsequent generations. Postulating that new species slowly emerged from this process of adaptation and survival, Darwin developed the hypothesis of evolution through natural selection, published in *On the Origin of Species* (1859). His theories both confirmed and challenged core Victorian ideals. For optimists, they seemed to prove the inevitability of society's progress through adaptation to new conditions. However, others thought Darwinism replaced the Biblical narrative of divine creation with a sterile record of blind, amoral processes and a brute struggle for survival. Humanity was no longer the apex of God's creative energy but an animal species derived 'naturally' from lower animal types and subject to extinction like any other genus.

Once science began to formulate a view of human life shaped – like that of animals – by chance, heredity and accidents of birth, confidence in willed decision-making and personal responsibility was significantly diminished. Such theories influenced literature, not only in theme but also in style. From the 1860s onwards, novel plots began to reflect the determinism of a Darwinian universe. Characters ceased to be

controlling agents, learning from experience and shaping their own destinies. Instead, like the protagonists of Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), they became the tragic victims of both natural and social laws.

Sciences of the body and mind

The knowledge revolution affected attitudes to the body. Notwithstanding the many anecdotes about the Victorian propensity for hiding bodily parts, the understanding and improvement of the physical self were matters of great interest. Science promised ways of exerting control over the body's wayward desires and perfecting its potential to the benefit of individual and society at large. For men, this meant improving physical energy and stamina in order to take up the challenges of public life; for women, it entailed preserving health, especially sexual health, to fulfil their childbearing role. Better understanding of the mechanics of the body drew science into the discourses of many fields, ranging from sport to religion.

Advances in medicine encouraged a more 'optimistic' approach to bodily experience. In 1854, the doctor John Snow offered evidence that the ravaging disease of cholera spread through contaminated water and food, not through the 'miasma' of bad air. This understanding not only improved the management of an illness that periodically killed thousands, but stimulated public health and sanitation initiatives of benefit to all classes. Although aspirin was not known until 1897, developments such as anaesthetic (1847) and antiseptics (1865) made childbirth and surgical interventions more survivable. Yet these comforting signs of progress also precipitated spiritual crises. Because pain was no longer an inevitable part of human experience, it was more difficult to justify suffering as part of God's mysterious will, or to equate the physical torments of hell with the action of a loving creator. As in so many Victorian cultural forms, medicine became a site where science struggled with religion for authority over knowledge and truth.

Theories about the body–mind relationship were central to the growth of the 'mental sciences', an attempt to describe

psychological processes in terms of physiological phenomena. Victorians knew from dreams and hallucinations that there were parts of the mind beyond the reach of consciousness. However, the Freudian model of the psyche and the modern science of psychology were unknown until the early twentieth century. Instead, the first practitioners of Victorian physiological psychology studied the physical mechanisms of mental activity in order to deal with individual aberrations. By focusing on the nerve processes that affected brain function, the mental sciences explained (away) behaviours deemed abnormal and showed how they might be disciplined and controlled. For instance, disruptive female attitudes and conduct were not linked to the frustrations and emotional damage of cultural oppression – though female writers knew better, as Charlotte Brontë suggested through her heroine in *Villette* (1853). Rather, such symptoms were diagnosed medically as hysteria or neurasthenia, pathological states arising from gynaecological and nervous ailments. The science of sexology, which developed in the last decades of the period, similarly invoked scientific method to identify and classify sexual preferences and behaviour, and thus establish norms. This framework served as a basis for 'diagnosing' alternative sexual identities – like homosexuality – as deviant 'inversions' of natural law that could be prevented or 'treated' to bring the individual subject into line with orthodox expectations.

The scientific approach to mental phenomena inflected Victorian literature. Fantasy and occult writing gradually focused more on psychological disturbance than on supernatural occurrences, as in George Eliot's clairvoyant novella, *The Lifted Veil* (1859), and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's (1814–73) hallucinatory short story, 'Green Tea' (1872). Spurious scientific fields like phrenology (the study of the skull to predict personality and intellect) and mesmerism also appealed to the literary imagination. Together with the more reputable sciences of the mind, they seemed to provide tools for penetrating social masks and controlling the deepest reaches of the personality, a theme explored in George du Maurier's (1834–96) novel *Trilby* (1894).

Human and social sciences

The human and social sciences helped to shape attitudes to cultural, racial and national differences. Archaeological research abandoned old-fashioned antiquarian methods, with their haphazard collection of artefacts from the past. It acquired an elaborate scientific apparatus, with emphasis on careful amassing of evidence, objective observation and analysis and the formulation and testing of hypotheses. Like many excavations in the period, Austen Layard's electrifying fieldwork at Nineveh (1845) extended an understanding of Western culture by uncovering a pre-classical past. Archaeological work at British sites, including Stonehenge, affirmed the steady progress of the nation by showing how native technologies evolved from flint to bronze and iron.

Philology, the comparative and historical study of language, together with the scholarly study of myths and religious systems, highlighted connections between cultures apparently separated by race and time. Alongside travel writing, archaeology and comparative religion, it contributed to the new interdisciplinary sciences of anthropology and ethnography. These fields helped Victorians to interpret the different cultures encountered through exploration and colonization. The influential anthropologist, Edward Tylor, pioneered the application of scientific techniques, including statistical analysis and classification, to the comparison of civilized and 'savage' customs and other social phenomena (Stocking 1996: 4). From this were deduced laws of cultural development, including the theory that many contemporary social, religious, and artistic practices had evolved from primitive rituals and beliefs.

Such approaches could narrow as much as enlarge public perceptions. Sociological studies, for example, made use of physiological, anthropological and ethnographic evidence (like facial expression, body shape and head size) to suggest the 'barbaric' nature of criminals, the mentally ill and other races. Using 'scientific' findings in this way both reinforced a sense of British cultural superiority and fuelled panic about the 'regressive' effects of violating cultural boundaries, by

intermarriage, for example. Assumptions about other races (as superstitious, childlike, criminal and sexually rapacious, for instance) were elided with many kinds of cultural difference, such as 'other' classes (especially the working class) and 'other' nations (like the Irish or the Italians). Such stereotypes can be located in many popular literary forms of the period, including adventure yarns for children, such as R. M. Ballantyne's (1825–94) *The Coral Island* (1858), and for adults, including H. Rider Haggard's novels of African exploration, featuring Allan Quatermain.

Exploration

Investigation in order to understand, control and improve is one way of describing the goal of Victorian science. This principle also applied to the passion for exploration. Expeditions to mysterious parts of the globe, such as Africa and the Middle East, significantly extended botanical, zoological, geographical and anthropological knowledge. This in turn facilitated naming, mapping and systematically classifying other civilizations: it enabled mastery through knowledge. Victorians who journeyed into Africa – David Livingstone, a missionary; Henry Stanley, the journalist commissioned to find him; and John Hanning Speke, the explorer who sought the source of the Nile – demonstrate the spirit of earnestness, courageous adventure and scientific curiosity that characterized many Victorian expeditions. However, commercial exploitation of new territories was an unsavoury by-product. The profitable scramble for conquest and plunder was frequently carried out in the name of science, discovery and evangelization.

Exploration also made a darker impression on the Victorian imagination. From time to time, risky endeavours brought home the frailty of cultural boundaries. The disappearance of the Franklin Expedition to the Arctic in 1845 stimulated a number of rescue missions, numerous articles and a collaborative drama by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, *The Frozen Deep* (1857). Even when it was clear that the expedition had been lost, the explorers' fate continued to exercise the

public mind. Rumours suggested that some men had survived through 'the last resource' – that is, through cannibalism. The act itself was bad enough, but the failure of discipline that must have enabled such desperate measures raised particularly awkward questions about weak officers incapable of leading their men effectively. It appeared that, even in the sturdy heart of a Victorian Briton, savage instincts could overturn traditional patterns of authority and obedience.

Technology

Behind the most striking alterations in the Victorian physical milieu, working practices and leisure activities lay the technological application of science. Technology shaped the environment, contributing noise and pollution but also providing better transport systems, including the first double-decker omnibus (horse-drawn), a national railway network and the London underground. Manufacturing technology generated a vast proliferation of goods, and gave rise to new marketing venues like the department store. Inventions on both sides of the Atlantic, like the sewing machine and the Kodak camera, changed domestic life for many. Photography, for example, turned individuals into local and social historians, recording family, friends, daily activities and scenes, or, as in the portraits of Julia Cameron, into artists giving visual solidity to figures from legend and myth. While industrial technology played its part in creating the 'dark continent' of the slum, it also revolutionized work in large ways and small. Today we think mainly of immense factories and mechanized production; but even the invention of the typewriter altered administrative processes and opened up new careers for women.

Technology radically altered the experience of space and time. The telegraph, voice recording and the telephone – all Victorian inventions – gave an uncanny presence to the invisible and absent. Grandfather had existence beyond the grave when his voice could be heard emanating from the cylinder attached to the family gramophone, and ephemeral events – like a speech by Florence Nightingale or a reading by

Tennyson – were preserved for future generations, so that their influence quite literally 'lived on'. The telegraph overcame time and distance, to the benefit of businesses and the private individual. With the laying of a permanent cable link to North America in 1866, communications technology proved even vast distances could be 'conquered' by science.

Transportation technology similarly revised the Victorian sense of spatial connections. In 1845, for example, the first iron-hulled steam ship, *Great Britain*, made her maiden voyage to New York. Built by the greatest Victorian engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the *Great Britain* showed that transatlantic travel could be fast and safe, even in a vessel twice as big as any other ship ever seen on the seas. Such technological applications were central to maintaining British global superiority because they made access to distant lands reliable and quick.

Perhaps *the* most significant technological revolution of the period was the development of the British rail system. George Stephenson had invented his 'Rocket' steam locomotive in 1829, but Victorian entrepreneurial energies exploited its potential. In 1829 there were 51 miles of rail tracks in the country. By 1890, almost 13,000 miles connected most major centres and intervening towns and villages (Newsome 1998: 30). Trains moved thousands of passengers quickly about the country – though not always safely, as seen in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846–8). Additionally, the railway boosted manufacturing by making it easier and quicker to move raw materials and finished goods in bulk, especially when visionaries such as Brunel, the creator of the Great Western Railway, integrated bridges and ships with the network.

The railway system certainly altered perceptions of time and space. The need for accurate timetables prompted Parliament to regularize all local times with Greenwich Mean Time. Isolated rural communities were drawn into the national mainstream through prompt rail delivery of post, newspapers and perishable goods. Massive track extensions restructured geography. Miles of cuttings sliced through countryside, and

rail viaducts bisected city districts (stimulating urban redevel-opment as a by-product). Quick transport enabled workers to live away from their place of employment in cheaper, outlying areas. The Victorian phenomenon of the suburb could not have occurred without the great expansion of the railway.

At first, Victorians feared that the speed of the train would draw the air from passengers' lungs and kill them. Tennyson – myopic and quite untechnical – fretted about the possibil-ity of the carriage wheels leaping from the 'grooves' in the track. Ruskin despised the excursion trains bringing 'roughs' to his home in Herne Hill, where they knocked the fences about, disturbed the cows and pulled at the flower blossoms (1908: 48). But detractors and enthusiasts alike had to concede that, through the railways, Victorian Britain was transformed into the modern state we recognize today.

Not all Victorians embraced the scientific and technolog-ical revolution with equanimity. John Henry Newman, for example, remained sceptical that 'education, periodical liter-ature, railroad travelling, ventilation, drainage, and the arts of life . . . [could] serve to make a population moral and happy' ([1864] 1968: 224). He had in mind the great spir-itual challenges occasioned by science and the creeping sec-ularism that seemed to accompany technological advance and prosperity. Undoubtedly, the wealth generated by tech-nology did occasion – in some – greed, rapaciousness and indifference to others' suffering, while the new reverence for scientific method and evidence did – for others – strip away religious beliefs. A higher standard of living made for a measure of political complacency: more citizens were content with their lives and willing to support the status quo. Nonetheless, the benefits to the health and ease of life for ordinary people justified the knowledge revolution for many Victorians. As the essayist and critic Frederic Harrison (1831–1923) claimed about his century: 'It is *not* the age of money-bags and cant, soot, hubbub, and ugliness. It is the age of great expectation and unwearied striving after better things' (1886: 425). Science and technology first created, and then lived up to, that 'great expectation'.